PSC of WISCONSIN

Update on the ARPA Broadband Grant Process

In May, Governor Evers made $100 million available for broadband infrastructure through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021. On June 1, 2021 the Commission opened the ARPA Broadband Access Grant application process to award the available funds. The Commission received 242 grant applications requesting a total of $440,519,692. A simple application map of the grant requests can be found online here. After the grant deadline, the Commission provided a three-week period for opposition comments, followed by a one-week response period. The screening panel is currently meeting to review and evaluate the applications. In addition, this panel will develop one or more merit lists for the Commission to consider when deciding to award funds.

Due to the volume of applications, the Commission discussion of the ARPA grants will be split into two parts. The Commission will likely meet in September to discuss the eligibility of some applications and for the Commission to provide direction on how to prioritize the remaining applications. Then, in mid-to-late October, the Commission will meet to review the merit of applications and award funds. This October decision may take place over one or two Commission meetings. We anticipate a Commission decision in late October identifying the projects that will receive funding.

Worth Reading: Rural Broadband

PEW

The Pew Charitable Trusts recently commissioned a white paper on *The Rural Broadband Industry* from CCG Consulting, a telecommunication consulting firm that work with rural communities and internet providers, to plan and develop broadband projects. The paper discusses the rural broadband market, specifically who are the service provider leaders, what challenges they face for expansion, and how these networks are funded. It includes good information on network planning, feasibility studies, challenges of the rural market. What the paper lacks in graphics and design it makes up for in clear and comprehensive content.

The Rural Broadband Industry

Federal Grants and Funding

FCC Emergency Connectivity Fund
The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced that it has received requests for $5.137 billion to fund 9.1 million connected devices and 5.4 million broadband connections as part of the $7.17 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF). The ECF is the single largest effort to bring connectivity and devices to students who lack them. Wisconsin schools and libraries requested $66,626,909.48 in this recent round.

In view of outstanding demand and the recent spike in coronavirus cases, the FCC will open a second application filing window for schools and libraries to request funding for connected devices and broadband connections for off-campus use by students, school staff, and library patrons for the current 2021-22 school year. During the second application filing window, which will run from September 28 to October 13, eligible schools and libraries can apply for financial support to purchase eligible equipment and services for

students, school staff and library patrons with unmet need.

NTIA Broadband Infrastructure Grants
The U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) announced that it has received more than 230 applications for the [Broadband Infrastructure Program](#) for a total of more than $2.5 billion in funding requests across 49 states and U.S. territories. A preliminary review had applications from Wisconsin totaling $71 million.

NTIA Tribal Broadband Grants
The U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) announced September 8 that it has received more than 280 applications for the [Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program](#) for a total of over $5 billion in funding requests, with $980 million available.

BroadbandUSA Interactive Funding Guide
You can find more information on federal broadband grants with BroadbandUSA's new [interactive federal funding guide](#), which provides a starting point for users to explore federal broadband funding options based on selected criteria, starting with the type of recipient followed by desired program purpose.

Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program
National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) [Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program](#) has $285 million for Historically Black College and Universities, Trial Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions to help students and communities get connected to the internet through affordable broadband service. This grant is now open for applications, with applications due December 1st [Application and Notice of Funding Opportunity](#)

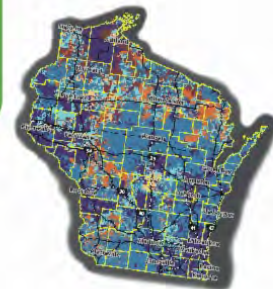### Economic Development Association grants
The federal [Economic Development Association](#) (EDA) programs are designed to support local and regional intermediaries supporting place-based economic development. There is currently $3 billion in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to invest across three focus areas: jobs, Communities Built for All and Statewide Planning, Research and Networks. Build Back Better Regional Challenge funding occurs in two phases and applications for phase one are due October 19, 2021. You can find more information and resources for grant application development at: https://eda.gov/funding-opportunities/ , https://eda.gov/resources/directory, buildbackbetter@eda.gov

Broadband Coverage Data Collection

The voluntary broadband coverage data collection is open for 90 days. The data collection period will end December 1, 2021. Questions about coverage data collection and request

Digital Equity and Inclusion Updates

Emergency Broadband Benefit
Wisconsin has 106,839 households enrolled in the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program as of September 13, 2021. In Wisconsin, 20% of likely eligible households are enrolled. The FCC recently expanded the program eligibility to include households approved to receive benefits under free and reduced price meal program during the 2021-2022 school year. Please continue to spread the word about the benefit to eligible households. Find information, resources and enrollment:

- PSC Emergency Internet website
- FCC Back-to-School Campaign tool kits
- EBB online enrollment

Wisconsin Digital Equity Stakeholder Group
The State of Wisconsin Digital Equity and Inclusion Stakeholder group meets monthly to inform the state Digital Equity and Inclusion Plan and work to strengthen the digital equity ecosystems in the state. The group has been discussing developing a digital navigator model, how to operationalize the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access report equity recommendations and getting quality devices to stay in the state.
If you are interested in joining the stakeholder group please email.

Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance Funds Available for Home Internet Access
This summer Governor Evers announced that the Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance Program (WERA), which provides rental and utility assistance to households affected by the pandemic, will include coverage of internet costs for qualifying households. Eligible applicants include Wisconsin residents who meet the following criteria:

- One or more individuals within the household has qualified for unemployment benefits or experienced a reduction in household income, experienced other financial hardship due, directly or indirectly, to the COVID-19 pandemic
- One or more individuals within the household can demonstrate a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability
- A household income at or below 80 percent of county median income

Interested partners should reach out directly to the local agencies that distribute these funds.

BroadbandUSA's Interactive Funding Guide
You can now sort through federal funding opportunities that support broadband adoption, digital literacy, devices and other digital inclusion program activities. The new interactive tool provides a starting point for users to explore starting with the type of recipient followed by desired program purpose.

Grant Recipient Corner
Reimbursement Requests and Support Documents

Not sure what the Wisconsin Broadband Office wants in the way of support documents? That is ok, it's not always simple. Luckily, your grant agreement can help! First, the basics:

- Read your Agreement(s) entirely.
- If you have grants open from multiple rounds, know that the agreements are largely the same but not exactly. Be sure to use the project-specific grant Agreement when you need help.
- Don't even know where your grant agreement is? Contact the email address below.

Support documents: Each Agreement contains a Reimbursement section, and within that

section is a part that begins with "Each Request for Payment must include...". While the entire Reimbursement section pertains specifically to the reimbursement process, this particular part of that section is most useful to gaining a good understanding of required support documentation.

Keep in mind, each Agreement has a Definitions section that describes the capitalized terms used throughout. For instance, the Agreements define *eligible costs* as those that the Commission can audit, and which directly pertain to the project that was presented to and awarded by the Commission. For example, when reporting internal labor costs, send us total hours contributed by employee class that worked on the project, the date(s) work was done, and total labor expense. Unless requested, we don't need individual employees' name or individual pay information.

If the Agreement still does not answer your question, we are always here. Contact us at PSCBroadbandGrantReimbursement@wisconsin.gov any time you have questions about the reimbursement process and support documents.

WBO E-Newsletter

The Wisconsin Broadband Office will send out regular communication to internet service providers, grant applicants and broadband stakeholders. We aim to be relevant and share timely information from our office.

Please reach out if anyone from the Wisconsin Broadband Office can be of assistance. Email Us